



Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses

September 23, 2014

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We greatly appreciate your meeting with us yesterday and asking our views. We look forward to working with you to advance research to improve the health of Gulf War veterans.

Yesterday's meeting showed the need for this advisory committee to provide you the full story on Gulf War veterans' health. Despite twelve years of work, the committee just yesterday, through its independent review process, noted:

1. VBA staff said that VA recognizes that chronic multisymptom illness and undiagnosed illnesses are presumed to be service-connected for Gulf War veterans. But their data show that eighty percent of these claims are denied.
2. OPH staff reported on a new review of diagnoses received by Gulf War veterans who use VA facilities, which appears to show their health problems are no different from veterans of the same period who did not deploy, but the review does not include 75,000 Gulf War veterans who served after March 1, 1991, the most toxic period, when oil well fires burned and the demolition of the Khamisiyah nerve agent depot occurred, and does not state that VA doctors were not trained to consider the illness a serious physical illness. The non-deployed also include veterans who were deployed later in other operations in the same theater and have received many of the same exposures.
3. OPH staff reported on a new survey of Gulf War veterans that shows higher rates of stress and depression than previous surveys, without mentioning that the survey was overweighted with questions on mental health and that people suffering from chronic health problems often become depressed due to their illness after 23 years, but it is not the cause of their illness.
4. The VA press release issued after the meeting stated that "nearly 800,000 Gulf War era Veterans are currently receiving compensation benefits for service-connected issues", without clarifying that for benefits purposes, the "Gulf War era" extends from 1990 to the present, taking in all recent Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

This underscores the need for a continued independent ongoing review process. We recommend that, for the new members you plan to appoint to the committee, you choose scientists and veterans who are independent of VA staff and who understand that Gulf War illness is not a mental illness, that you continue to provide for the committee to have its own independent staff, and that you continue to welcome the committee's comments on all aspects of VA's Gulf War research program.

Respectfully,

James Binns, chairman
James A. Bunker
Fiona Crawford, PhD
Beatrice Golomb, MD, PhD
Nancy Klimas, MD
James O'Callaghan, PhD
Lea Steele, PhD
Roberta White, PhD